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... A Florentine Christmas
of a century ago

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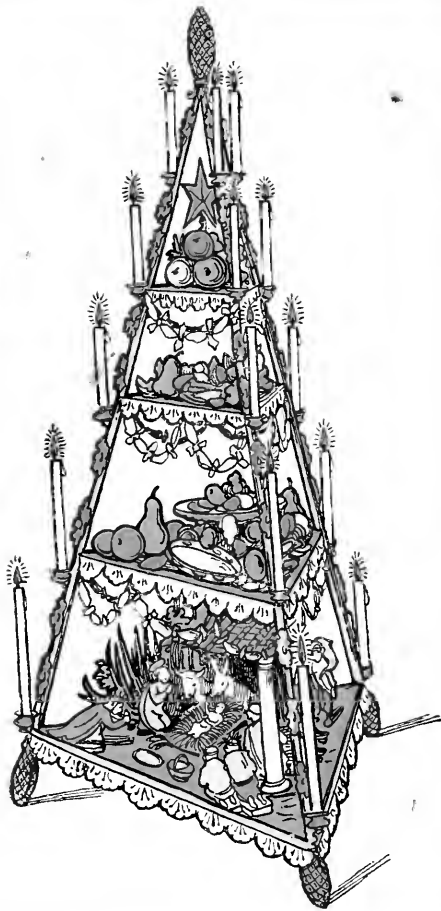
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A florentine Christmas
of a Century ago

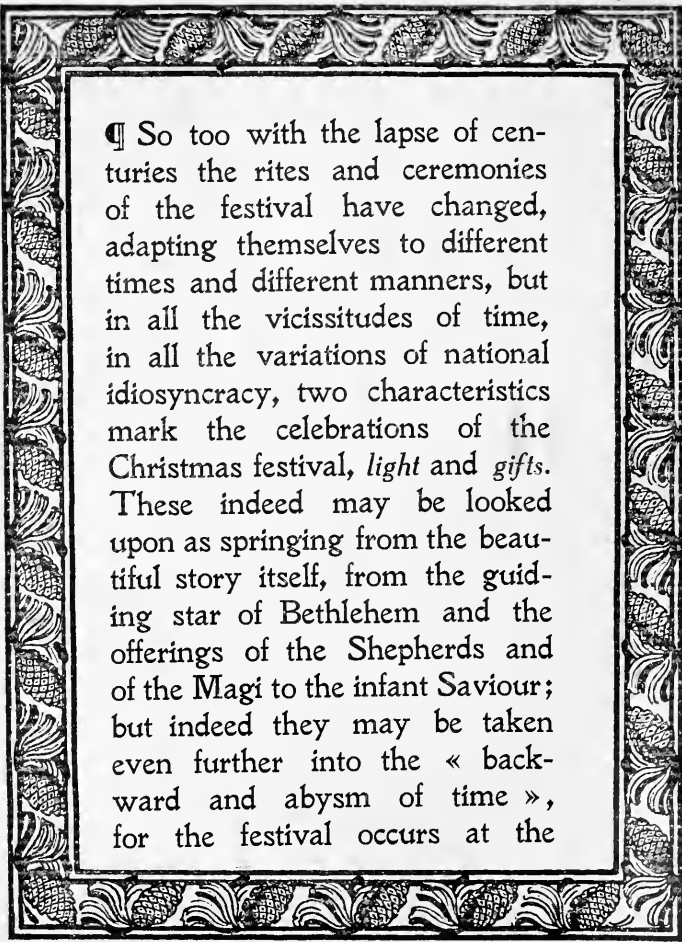
“The Ceppo,”

Giulio Giannini & Son
Publishers - Florence
1912

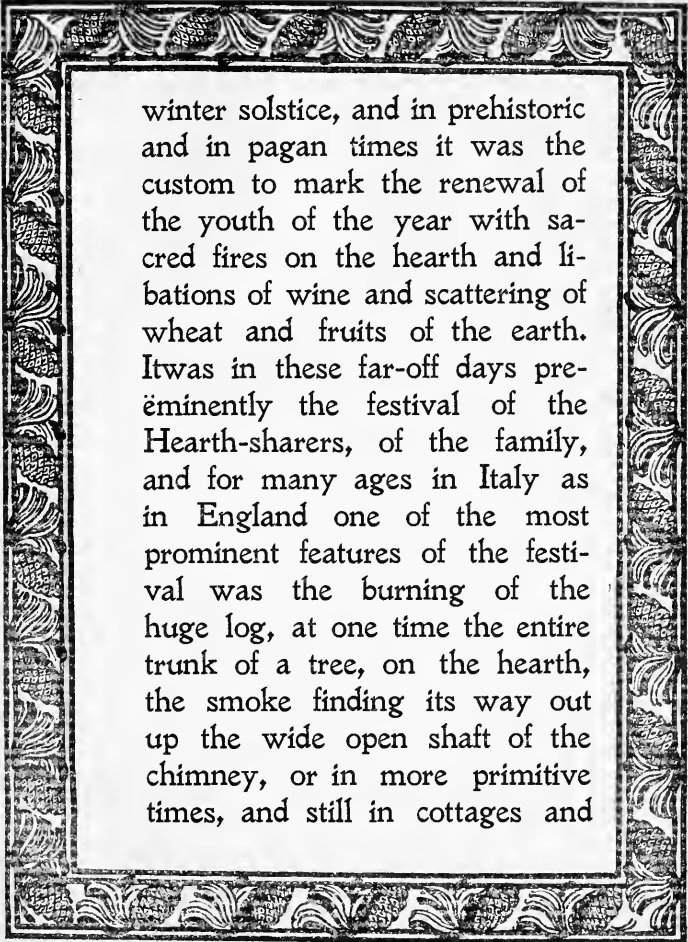
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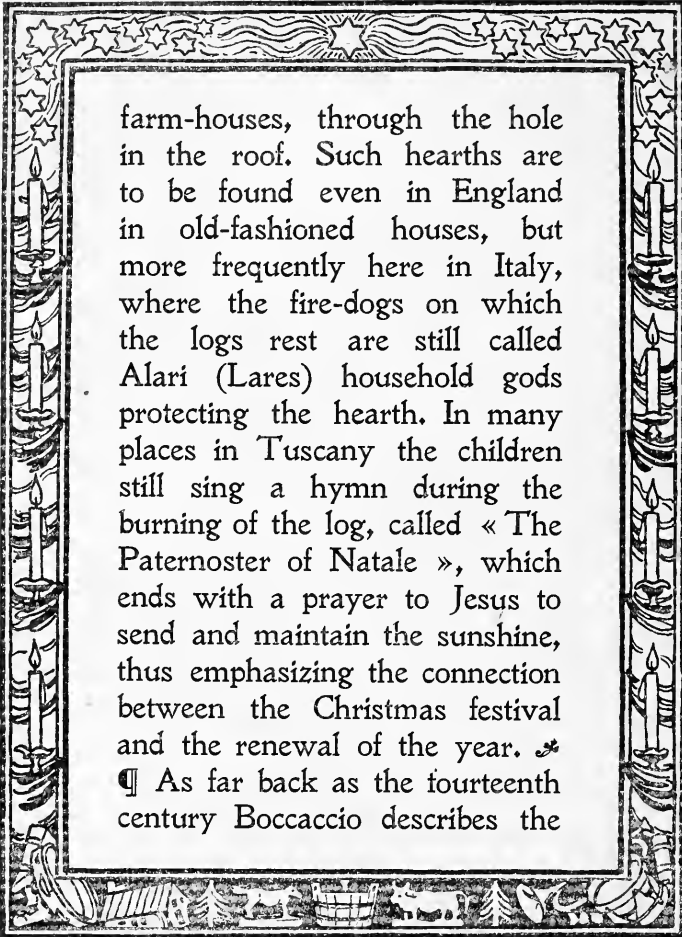
How many stories, how many legends have gathered round the celebration of the Vigil of the Nativity! Stories sad and merry, legends simple and fantastic, handed on from one generation to another, heard from the lips of grandmothers, and finding their way with slight differences of circumstance and costume from nation to nation and from people to people. ❀ ❀



¶ So too with the lapse of centuries the rites and ceremonies of the festival have changed, adapting themselves to different times and different manners, but in all the vicissitudes of time, in all the variations of national idiosyncrasy, two characteristics mark the celebrations of the Christmas festival, *light* and *gifts*. These indeed may be looked upon as springing from the beautiful story itself, from the guiding star of Bethlehem and the offerings of the Shepherds and of the Magi to the infant Saviour; but indeed they may be taken even further into the « backward and abysm of time », for the festival occurs at the

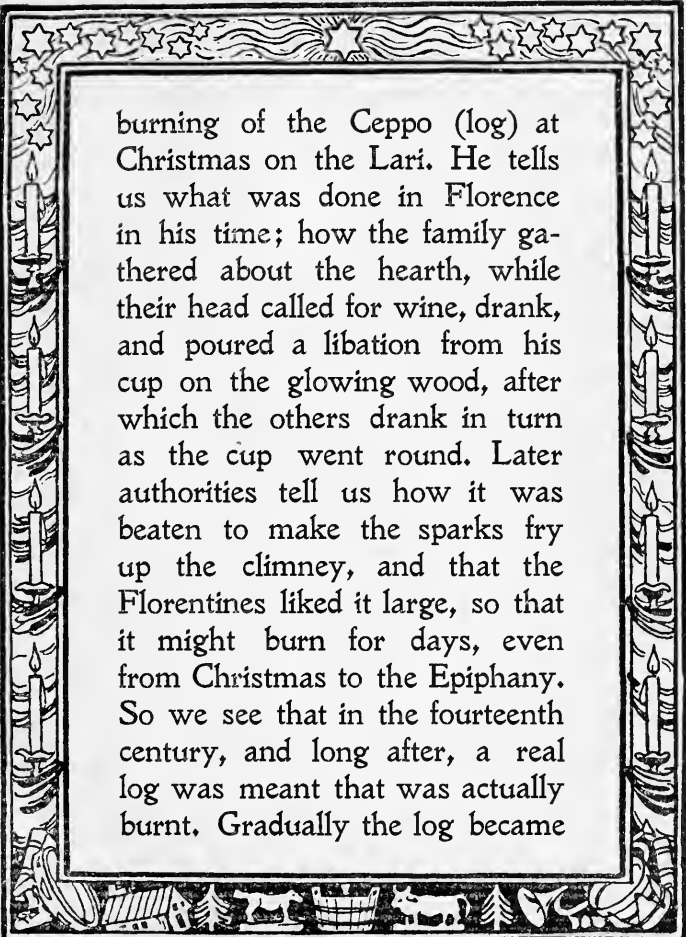


winter solstice, and in prehistoric and in pagan times it was the custom to mark the renewal of the youth of the year with sacred fires on the hearth and libations of wine and scattering of wheat and fruits of the earth. It was in these far-off days pre-eminently the festival of the Hearth-sharers, of the family, and for many ages in Italy as in England one of the most prominent features of the festival was the burning of the huge log, at one time the entire trunk of a tree, on the hearth, the smoke finding its way out up the wide open shaft of the chimney, or in more primitive times, and still in cottages and

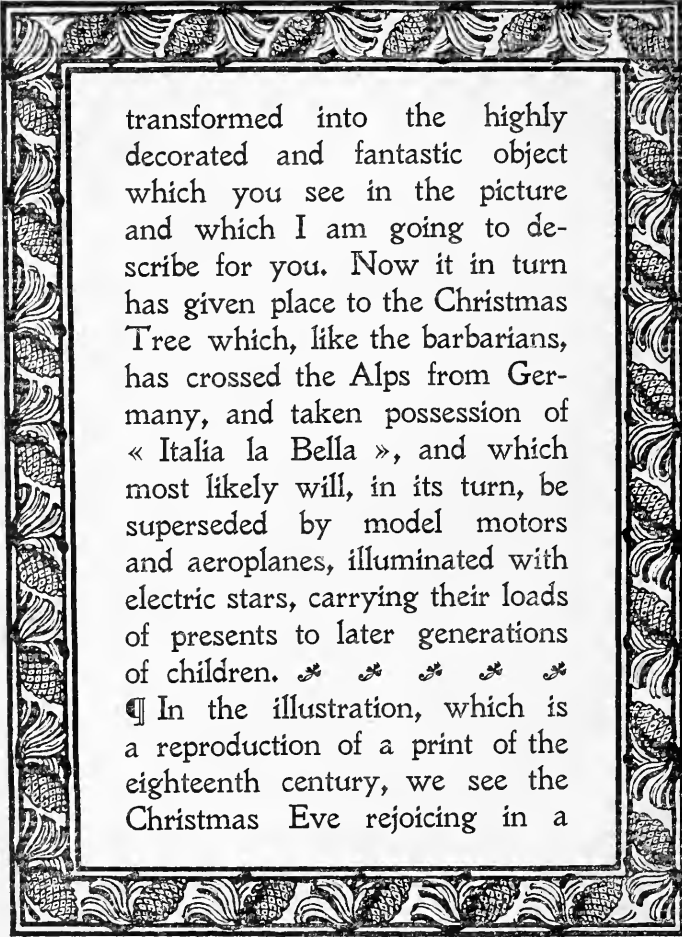


farm-houses, through the hole in the roof. Such hearths are to be found even in England in old-fashioned houses, but more frequently here in Italy, where the fire-dogs on which the logs rest are still called Alari (Lares) household gods protecting the hearth. In many places in Tuscany the children still sing a hymn during the burning of the log, called « The Paternoster of Natale », which ends with a prayer to Jesus to send and maintain the sunshine, thus emphasizing the connection between the Christmas festival and the renewal of the year. ❧

¶ As far back as the fourteenth century Boccaccio describes the

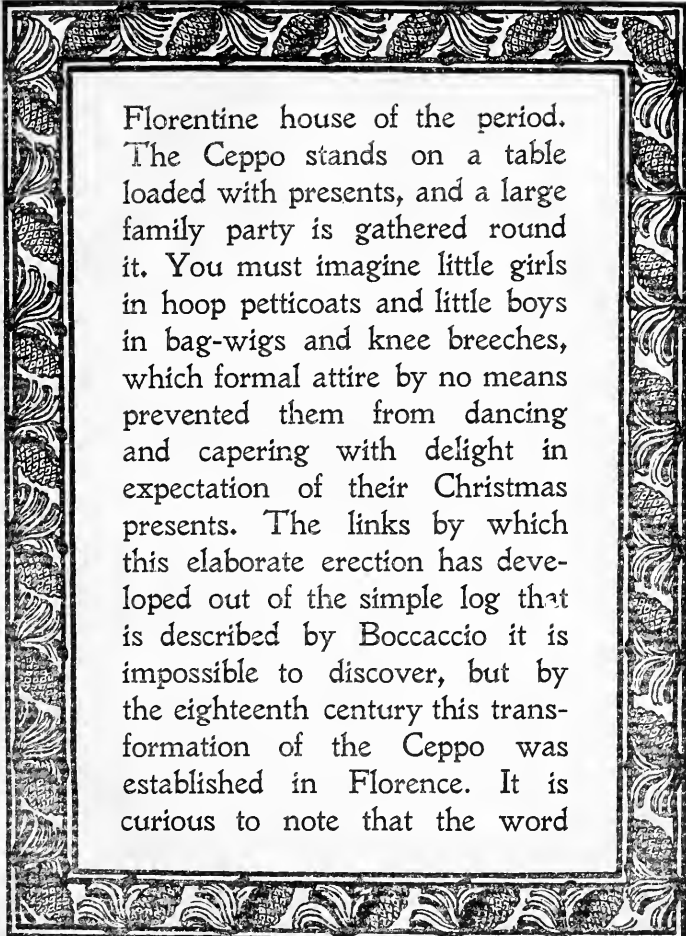


burning of the Ceppo (log) at Christmas on the Lari. He tells us what was done in Florence in his time; how the family gathered about the hearth, while their head called for wine, drank, and poured a libation from his cup on the glowing wood, after which the others drank in turn as the cup went round. Later authorities tell us how it was beaten to make the sparks fry up the chimney, and that the Florentines liked it large, so that it might burn for days, even from Christmas to the Epiphany. So we see that in the fourteenth century, and long after, a real log was meant that was actually burnt. Gradually the log became

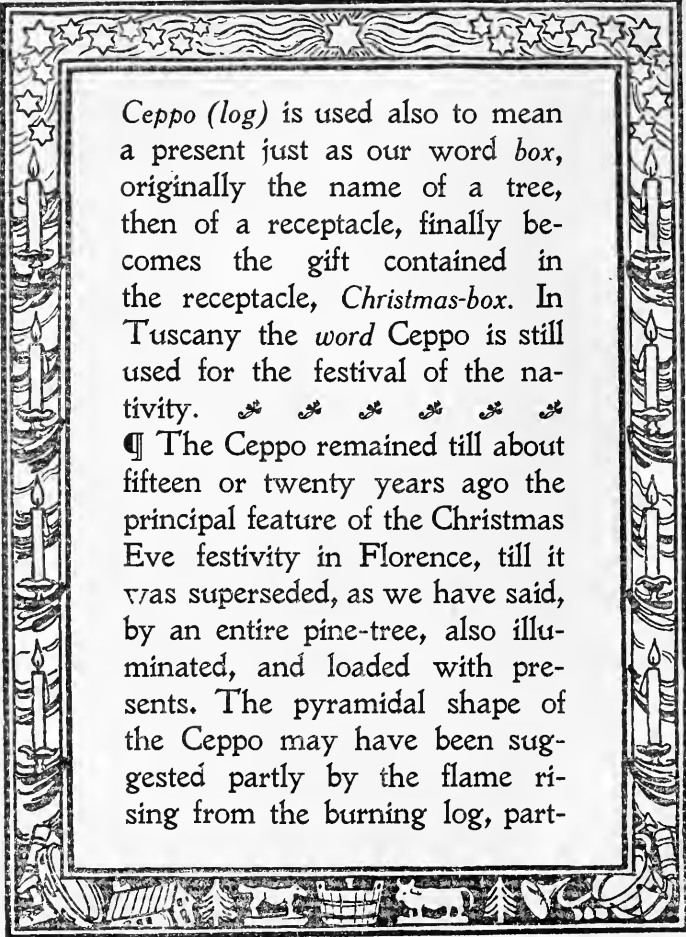


transformed into the highly decorated and fantastic object which you see in the picture and which I am going to describe for you. Now it in turn has given place to the Christmas Tree which, like the barbarians, has crossed the Alps from Germany, and taken possession of « Italia la Bella », and which most likely will, in its turn, be superseded by model motors and aeroplanes, illuminated with electric stars, carrying their loads of presents to later generations of children. ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁

¶ In the illustration, which is a reproduction of a print of the eighteenth century, we see the Christmas Eve rejoicing in a



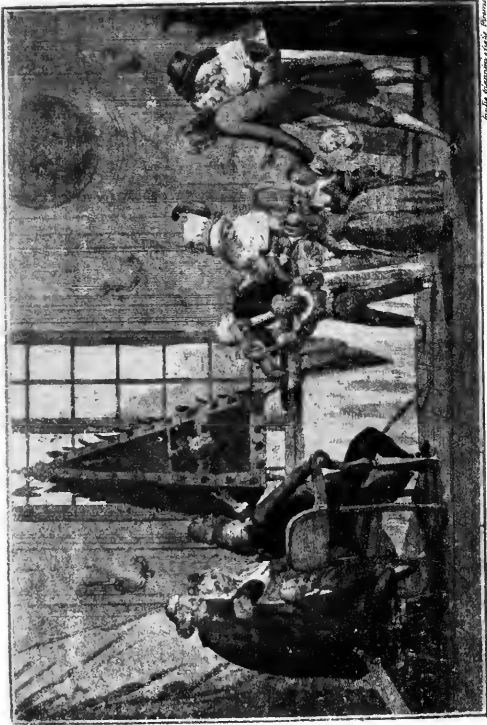
Florentine house of the period. The Ceppo stands on a table loaded with presents, and a large family party is gathered round it. You must imagine little girls in hoop petticoats and little boys in bag-wigs and knee breeches, which formal attire by no means prevented them from dancing and capering with delight in expectation of their Christmas presents. The links by which this elaborate erection has developed out of the simple log that is described by Boccaccio it is impossible to discover, but by the eighteenth century this transformation of the Ceppo was established in Florence. It is curious to note that the word



Ceppo (log) is used also to mean a present just as our word *box*, originally the name of a tree, then of a receptacle, finally becomes the gift contained in the receptacle, *Christmas-box*. In Tuscany the word *Ceppo* is still used for the festival of the nativity. ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁ ❁

¶ The *Ceppo* remained till about fifteen or twenty years ago the principal feature of the Christmas Eve festivity in Florence, till it was superseded, as we have said, by an entire pine-tree, also illuminated, and loaded with presents. The pyramidal shape of the *Ceppo* may have been suggested partly by the flame rising from the burning log, part-

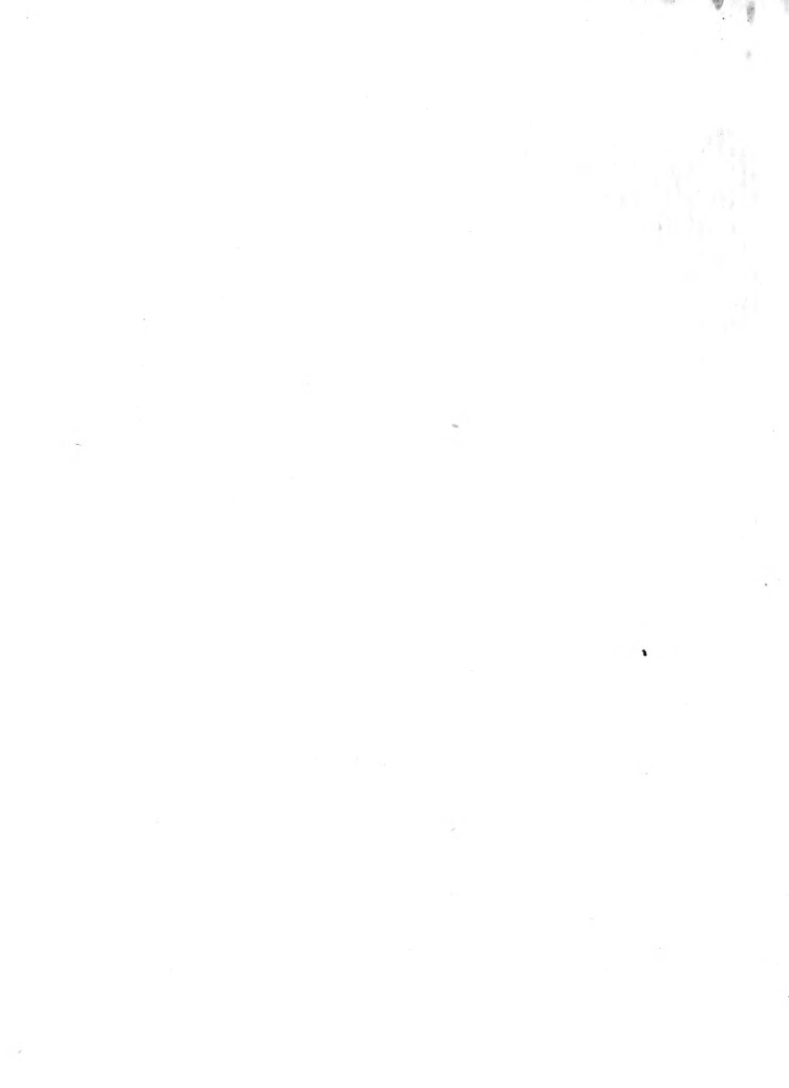
Un Coppo fiorentino nel XVIII secolo.

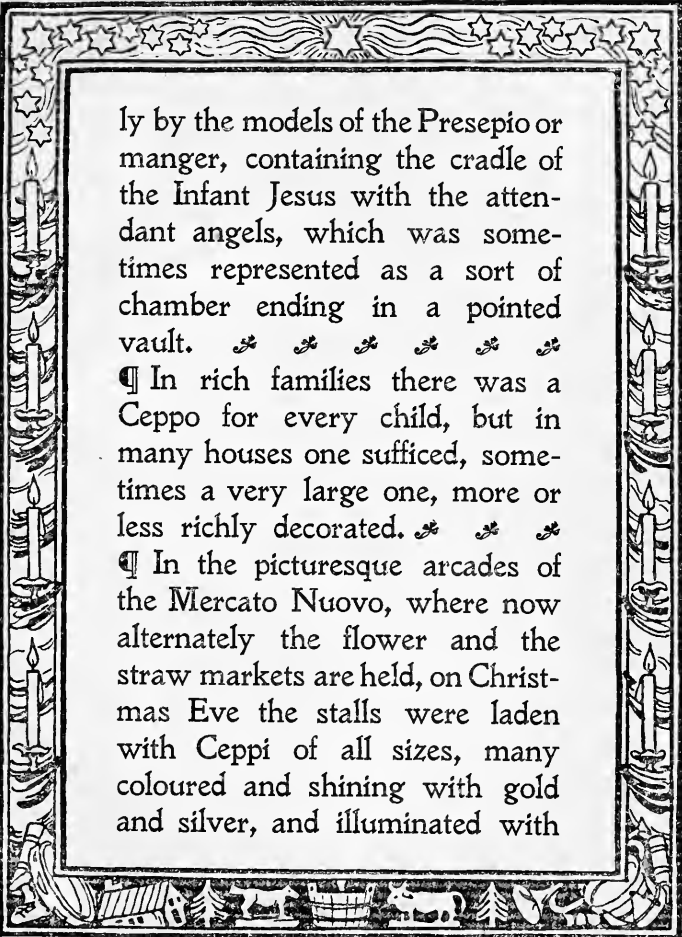


G. P.

1780

A Florentine Christmas of the XVIIIth Century.

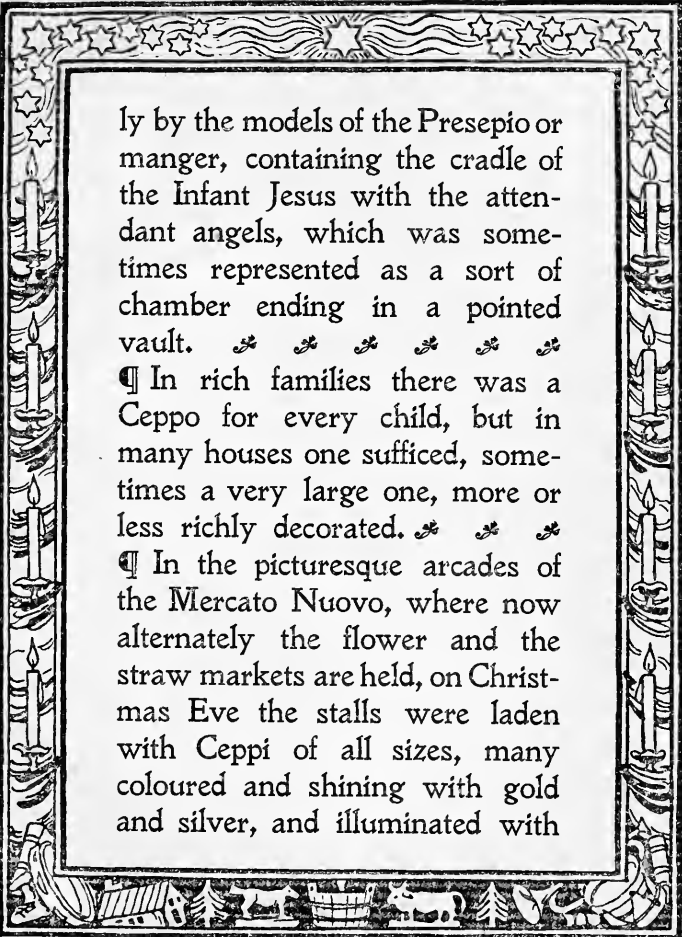


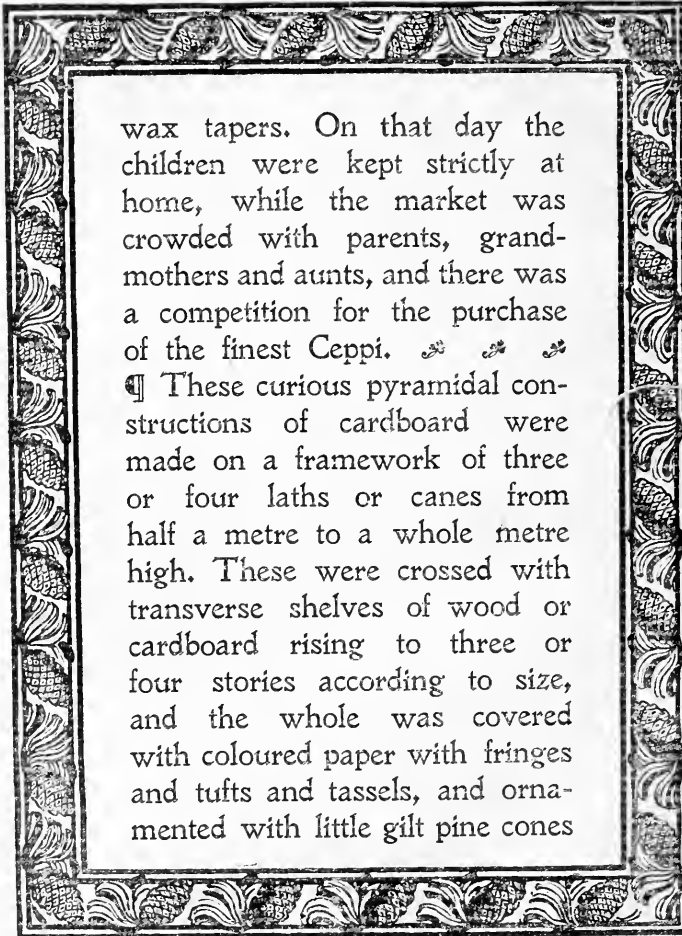


ly by the models of the Presepio or manger, containing the cradle of the Infant Jesus with the attendant angels, which was sometimes represented as a sort of chamber ending in a pointed vault. ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀

¶ In rich families there was a Ceppo for every child, but in many houses one sufficed, sometimes a very large one, more or less richly decorated. ❀ ❀ ❀

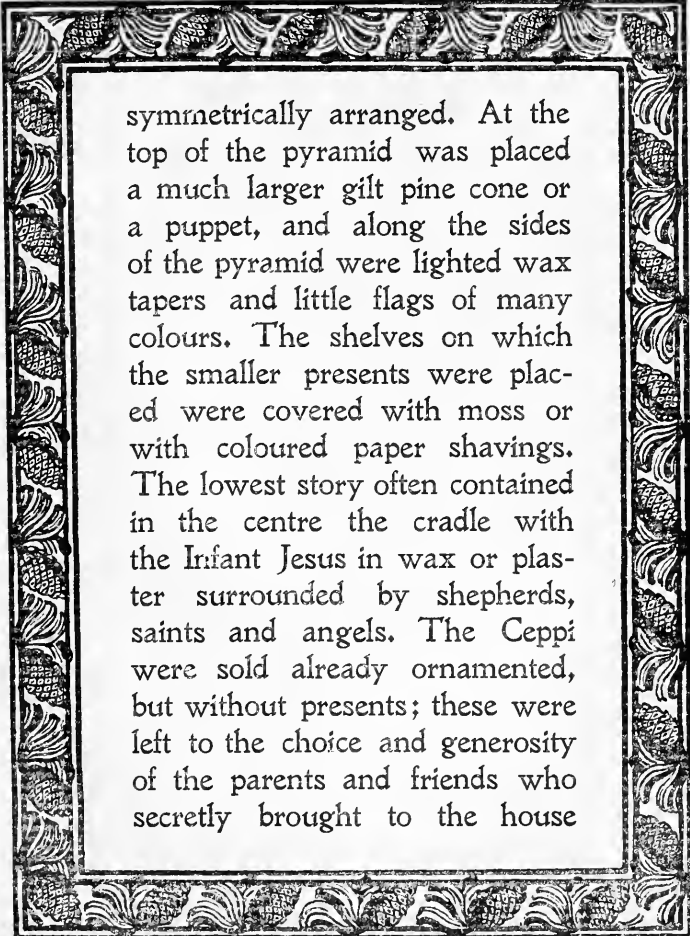
¶ In the picturesque arcades of the Mercato Nuovo, where now alternately the flower and the straw markets are held, on Christmas Eve the stalls were laden with Ceppi of all sizes, many coloured and shining with gold and silver, and illuminated with



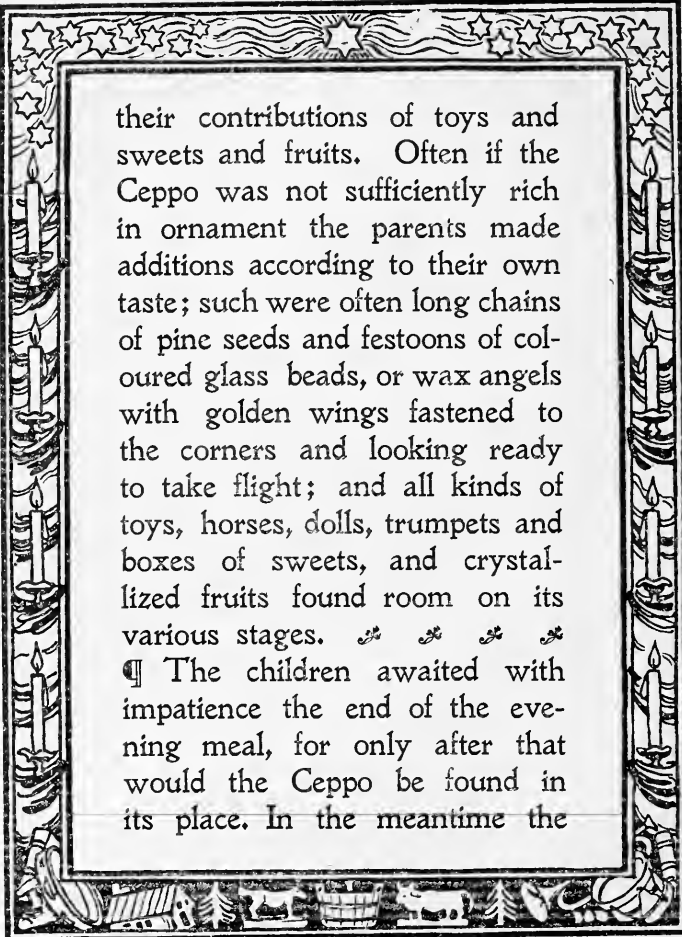


wax tapers. On that day the children were kept strictly at home, while the market was crowded with parents, grandmothers and aunts, and there was a competition for the purchase of the finest Ceppi. ❀ ❀ ❀

¶ These curious pyramidal constructions of cardboard were made on a framework of three or four laths or canes from half a metre to a whole metre high. These were crossed with transverse shelves of wood or cardboard rising to three or four stories according to size, and the whole was covered with coloured paper with fringes and tufts and tassels, and ornamented with little gilt pine cones

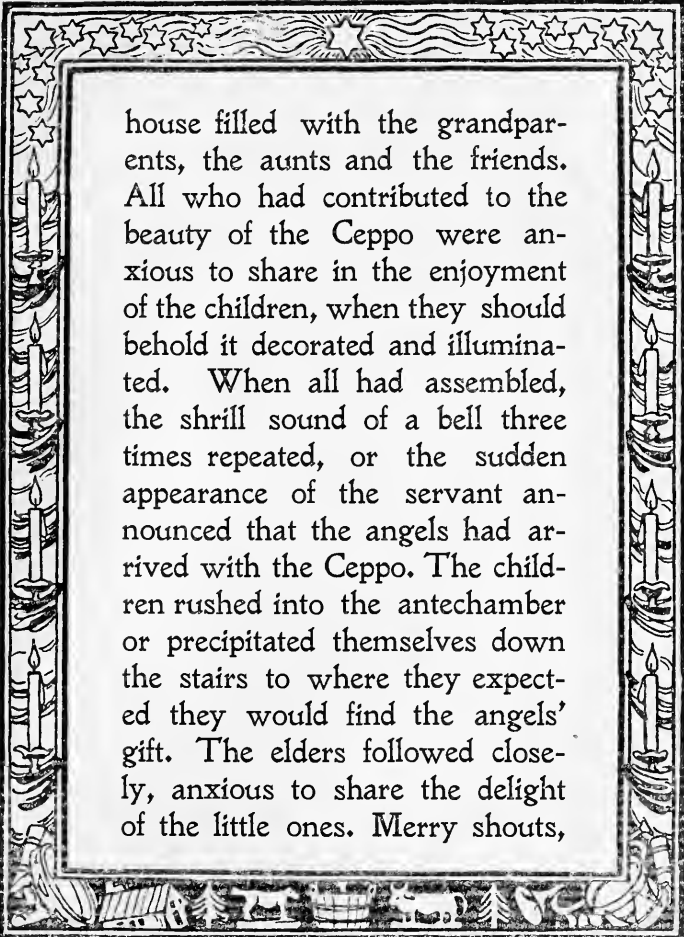


symmetrically arranged. At the top of the pyramid was placed a much larger gilt pine cone or a puppet, and along the sides of the pyramid were lighted wax tapers and little flags of many colours. The shelves on which the smaller presents were placed were covered with moss or with coloured paper shavings. The lowest story often contained in the centre the cradle with the Infant Jesus in wax or plaster surrounded by shepherds, saints and angels. The Ceppi were sold already ornamented, but without presents; these were left to the choice and generosity of the parents and friends who secretly brought to the house

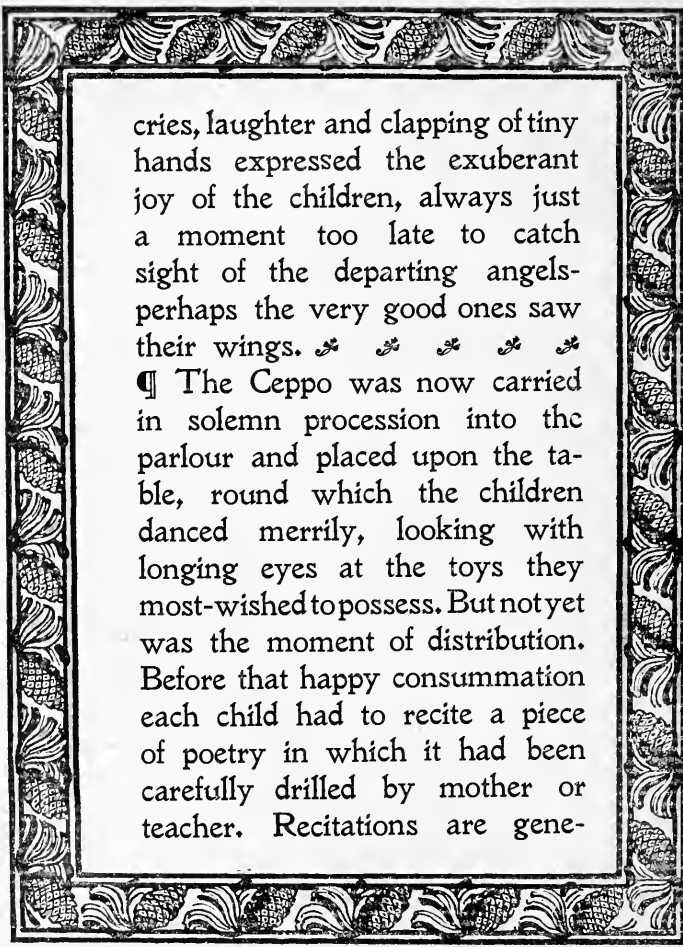


their contributions of toys and sweets and fruits. Often if the Ceppo was not sufficiently rich in ornament the parents made additions according to their own taste; such were often long chains of pine seeds and festoons of coloured glass beads, or wax angels with golden wings fastened to the corners and looking ready to take flight; and all kinds of toys, horses, dolls, trumpets and boxes of sweets, and crystalized fruits found room on its various stages. ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀

¶ The children awaited with impatience the end of the evening meal, for only after that would the Ceppo be found in its place. In the meantime the

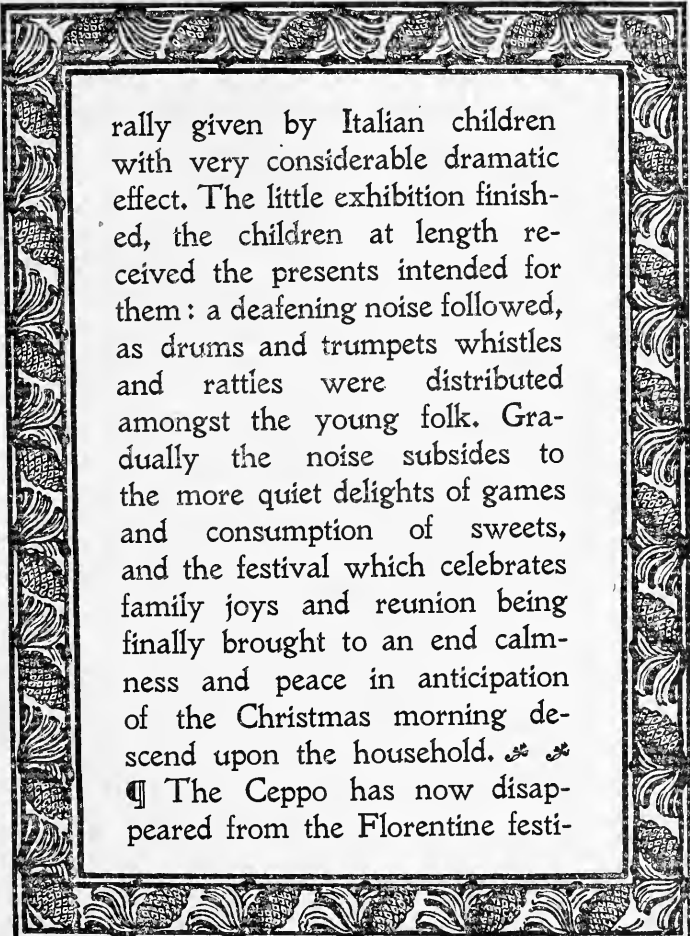


house filled with the grandparents, the aunts and the friends. All who had contributed to the beauty of the Ceppo were anxious to share in the enjoyment of the children, when they should behold it decorated and illuminated. When all had assembled, the shrill sound of a bell three times repeated, or the sudden appearance of the servant announced that the angels had arrived with the Ceppo. The children rushed into the antechamber or precipitated themselves down the stairs to where they expected they would find the angels' gift. The elders followed closely, anxious to share the delight of the little ones. Merry shouts,



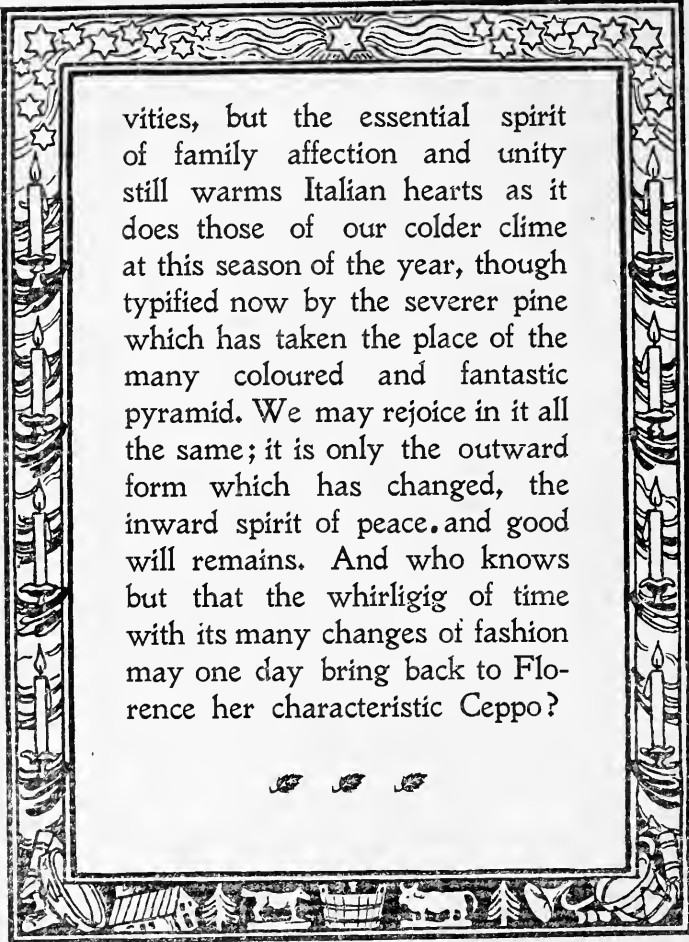
cries, laughter and clapping of tiny hands expressed the exuberant joy of the children, always just a moment too late to catch sight of the departing angels—perhaps the very good ones saw their wings. ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀ ❀

¶ The Ceppo was now carried in solemn procession into the parlour and placed upon the table, round which the children danced merrily, looking with longing eyes at the toys they most-wished to possess. But not yet was the moment of distribution. Before that happy consummation each child had to recite a piece of poetry in which it had been carefully drilled by mother or teacher. Recitations are gene-



rally given by Italian children with very considerable dramatic effect. The little exhibition finished, the children at length received the presents intended for them: a deafening noise followed, as drums and trumpets whistles and rattles were distributed amongst the young folk. Gradually the noise subsides to the more quiet delights of games and consumption of sweets, and the festival which celebrates family joys and reunion being finally brought to an end calmness and peace in anticipation of the Christmas morning descend upon the household. ❀ ❀

¶ The Ceppo has now disappeared from the Florentine festi-



vities, but the essential spirit of family affection and unity still warms Italian hearts as it does those of our colder clime at this season of the year, though typified now by the severer pine which has taken the place of the many coloured and fantastic pyramid. We may rejoice in it all the same; it is only the outward form which has changed, the inward spirit of peace, and good will remains. And who knows but that the whirligig of time with its many changes of fashion may one day bring back to Florence her characteristic Ceppo?



